DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 475 745 FL 027 652

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TITLE	Bilingual Education in Kyrgyzstan: Pros and Cons.
PUB DATE	2001-09-00
NOTE	10p.; Paper presented at the Bilingual Education and Conflict Prevention Conference (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, September 20-22, 2001)
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Bilingual Education; Diversity (Student); Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Immersion Programs; Kyrgyz; Language Minorities; Russian; Second Language Learning; Uncommonly Taught Languages
IDENTIFIERS	*Kyrgyzstan

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the potential of bilingual education and its possible implementation in Kyrgzystan, focusing on why bilingual education can be useful in solving linguistic tension in Kyrgzystan and which organizational questions must be considered to make bilingual education effective. The paper begins by examining and refuting common concerns (children will be traumatized if they are spoken to in a different language, and children will confuse the two languages and end up unable to speak either one correctly). Next, it presents common models and experiences with bilingual education from other countries (submersion, immersion, partial immersion, transitional immersion, maintenance immersion, and two-way immersion). Finally, it discusses issues related to curriculum, teachers, textbooks, and classroom composition. It concludes that children who attend bilingual education programs naturally grow up with two languages, have more positive attitudes toward other ethnic and linguistic groups, and are more confident about their own ethno-linguistic identity. It asserts that bilingualism is a prerequisite for dialogue and understanding between ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan. (SM)

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BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN KYRGYZSTAN: PROS AND CONS

Britta Korth
CIMERA

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will discuss the potentials of bilingual education and its chances for implementation in Kyrgyzstan. I shall answer the following questions: Why is bilingual education useful in solving linguistic tension in Kyrgyzstan? Which organizational questions need to be considered in order to make a bilingual education program effective?

Some terminological clarification: in contrast to language teaching, bilingual education refers to the teaching of contents in two languages, in this case in Kyrgyz and Russian. It not only facilitates the acquisition of a second language, but also guarantees the maintenance of bilingualism.

This paper's suggestions are based on several years of experience as a lecturer at two Kyrgyz Universities, as the director of the *Bilingual Education Project*[1] and on my research as a linguist.

2. COMMON BELIEFS AND CONCERNS

When the CIMERA project team introduced the idea of educating children in two languages, a lot of parents expressed the following concerns about their children's emotional and cognitive development:

My child is going to be traumatized, if they will speak to him or her in a new language.

This worry is very often expressed by Russian-speaking parents, who are reluctant to expose their child to Kyrgyz. Do children really risk their psychological well-being? Experiences in other multilingual societies have shown that children do not suffer psychological damage when they are exposed to the new language as long as their first language is also valued and understood.

In order to explain this, I will introduce the terms minority- and majority-language-speaker. The terms *majority*- and *minority* language do not refer to the relative number of speakers of a given

[1] For further information see www.cimera.org

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language, but to their perceived status in society. Usually the minority speakers become bilingual in their language and the majority language, whereas the majority speakers remain monolingual in their own language. Since in Kyrgyzstan Kyrgyz speakers are more likely to become bilingual in the two languages than Russian speakers, I will refer to Kyrgyz as a minority language. In Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz monolinguals, who are placed in all-Russian classes and experience a submersion-shock[2]. In particular in rural areas, where children grow up exclusively with Kyrgyz and have to master Russian from the first class on, this experience has negative influence on the children for two reasons: first, they learn that Russian is connected with frustration and pressure, and second they also experience that their language is not useful and not valued in the educational system[3]. As a consequence, their self-esteem suffers and they develop an unfavourable attitude towards Russian, which hinders their language learning.

Nevertheless, French-English immersion classes in Canada have shown[4], that majority language speakers, in the Canadian case English speakers, experience enough recognition for their language skills, that their self-esteem is strong enough to undergo the second language immersion. Thus if a certain number of classes are taught in Kyrgyz and parents support and encourage their children, Russian speaking children perceive the new language as an enrichment. The fear of trauma is often a reflection of the parents' own reluctance and fear to communicate in Kyrgyz.

Another concern is:

My child will confuse the two languages and in the end speak neither one correctly.

This fear has its roots in two phenomena:

The first is the mixing of Russian and Kyrgyz as it often occurs in bilingual settings. A closer look at the language mixers' competencies reveals that most of them master one of the languages to the same degree as a monolingual speaker. For expressive reasons they make use of the other language's resources. Thus their language competencies are not deficient. On the contrary; through their bilingualism they can use linguistic means creatively in accordance with the demands of the situation. This flexibility is a cognitive ability, which monolingual speakers acquire only through effortful learning and training. Switching from one language to the other can be interpreted as an indication of the speaker's fluency and competence.

The second phenomena is that in some cases the languages are only spoken in specific domainss. If a child speaks Kyrgyz at home, Russian at school and maybe Uzbek with the neighbours, he or she will have enough competencies in each of the languages for communication in the corresponding situation. Consequently, using Russian in the kitchen is highly problematic, just as

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[2] Some authors call the submersion method the *sink-or-swim method*. This expression illustrates the possible shock under unfavourable circumstances.

[3] Korth, 2001

[4] Cp. the Canadian immersion model, where English-speaking children are educated in French (Baker; 1993; 158ff.)

using Kyrgyz for theoretical topics is, if the corresponding vocabulary and expressions have not been learnt. This phenomenon only becomes a problem when the child does not have sufficient linguistic means in either language to express certain contents. However, this is not necessarily a consequence of bilingualism, but rather an indication of deficient linguistic development. This can also happen to monolingual children, if they are exposed to deficient communication and language.

How does the bilingual education project prevent psychological barriers and linguistic confusion?

- The first principle: keep the linguistic sources constant. In the project kindergartens, each educator speaks one language only. Consequently, children know whom to address in which language. In addition, similar games are played and the same material is used, so that knowledge acquired in one language can easily be transferred to the other language and thus facilitate the acquisition of the new language.
- The second principle: keep the linguistic input on a level that corresponds to the child's cognitive development. If educators use words instead of phrases or other deficient linguistic input, we cannot expect the child to realize that the second language is just as useful as the first. Vice versa, if we try to TEACH the children complicated structures, which go beyond their cognitive abilities and which they do not understand in their first language, we can not expect good linguistic results (see B. Schulter).

Given these conditions, the linguistic results of bilingual education do surpass the results of traditional language teaching. Furthermore, the children's self esteem is strengthened, while they grow up with the awareness that linguistic differences are not a reason for division of society. Language and communication skills are a prerequisite for intercultural understanding and peaceful co-habitation.

3. COMMON MODELS AND EXPERIENCES FROM OTHER COUNTRIES

Bilingual education models throughout the world have shown that bilingual education is an efficient way to deal with linguistic diversity in a multilingual society. Guaranteeing mother tongue instruction, (e.g. in Kyrgyz, Uzbek or Tajik) they do not at the same time exclude non-majority language speakers from educational and economic opportunities. Nevertheless, as mentioned above school performance is influenced by status differences between linguistic-groups[5]. If the underlying idea that both languages are equal is supported in the classroom, bilingual education policy is a powerful tool to influence not only language competencies, but also language and interethnic attitudes.

In this section I will explain and comment on the most common bilingual models and how they can be applied in Kyrgyzstan.

[5] Crawford, 1989, 108

3.1. Submersion

Submersion (also called total immersion) reflects the idea of assimilating minority-speakers into majority language and culture. Children are exclusively exposed to the majority language in the monolingual classroom. The use of children's home language is forbidden and the whole curriculum is "experienced in the second language"[6]. Children are expected to adopt the native speakers' language without methodological support.

This "method", introduced during Soviet times, was never questioned and therefore continues to be applied. Submersion is the usual practice in Russian-instruction schools in the Kyrgyz Republic, even though the submersion shock for some non-Russian speakers is enormous[7]. This results in "bicultural ambivalence", which manifests itself in "shame towards the first culture and hostility towards the other"[8]. This submersion shock can be balanced through the introduction of classes taught in Kyrgyz (cp. 3.2. partial immersion). The Kyrgyz student is given linguistic recognition and the frustration from not understanding Russian is relieved. A lot of parents might object to this idea, because it is a common belief, that more hours in Russian will lead to better linguistic results. Yet, more is not always better. The effect of supporting the child in his or her mother tongue will enable him or her to develop favourable attitudes towards both languages, which in turn prevents psychological barriers and thus facilitates language learning. The regularity with which the child is exposed to Russian and the long-term effect, however, do influence the linguistic outcome, i.e. it is important to start early and to offer bilingual education throughout the curriculum.

3.2. Immersion

As the Canadian experience shows[9], the concept of instruction in the second language has proven to lead to successful acquisition of bilingualism, if the immersed children belong to the majority linguistic group (i.e. English in Canada resp. Russian in Kyrgyzstan). For Kyrgyzstan this means that Russian speaking children are instructed in Kyrgyz. This model can be applied in Kyrgyzstan in some areas. It has high chances of success, since Russian speaking children are given enough opportunities to practice their Kyrgyz outside school, due to the demographic situation. It will only be successful, however, if parents find it acceptable and support it and if the quality of teaching and teaching materials can compete with its Russian equivalents.

3.3. Partial Immersion

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[6] Baker, 1988, 47
[7] for further details see Korth, 2001
[8] Crawford, 1989, 107
[9] Baker, 1993, 161 and Wode, 1995, 57.

Partial immersion programs can have two aims: maintenance of the first language (i.e. Kyrgyz) or the gradual transition to the majority language (i.e. Russian)[10]. As opposed to total immersion the idea of partial immersion takes into account that children acquire the target language better, if part of the curricula is instructed in their native-language. Children are allowed to use their home language until they feel confident enough in the target language. In the ideal case this implies that teachers have at least some passive competence in the children's first language. By gradually immersing the students into the majority-language they are supported to become bilingual to various extents.

Transitional Immersion programs intend to gradually increase instruction in the second language up to 100%, thus assimilating children into the majority language culture. The maintenance of competencies in the home-language is considered a private matter. Transitional immersion programs are therefore strongly connected to the ideal of a monolingual society, where linguistic and culture diversity are seen as detrimental to unity and therefore need to be overcome. For this reason I do not consider them a useful model for Kyrgyzstan, where multilingualism is de jure valued and supported.

Maintenance-immersion, on the other hand, has become more and more popular in societies where cultural and linguistic diversity is valued, and therefore this model is suitable for Kyrgyzstan. Maintenance immersion programs is aimed at more or less homogenous groups of Kyrgyz speakers. The program remains bilingual to various extents throughout the curricula, thus the ultimate goal is to facilitate expression and literacy in both languages. In Kyrgyzstan, it is applicable in regions where Russian is not the first language for the majority of the students, i.e. in rural areas or in the Kyrgyz-instruction schools. Russian subjects can be introduced at a certain percentage of hours, which can then be increased or decreased, depending on the resources and educational aim.

Two-Way Immersion teaches speakers of both languages in one class in both languages. The ultimate goal is bilingualism, biliteracy and biculturalism for individuals of both linguistic groups. This program has been successfully applied in a number of schools in the US for almost 20 years[11]. Its advantages lie in the two-way effect. Students of both languages have the experience of learning in a new language. Thus none of them feels disadvantaged. On the contrary: linguistic potential from both sides is integrated and used. This gives the Russian-speakers, who so far have little chance to communicate in Kyrgyz in the academic setting, the opportunity to learn to communicate in Kyrgyz. In addition, it will maintain Kyrgyz speakers language competencies, while at the same time make Russian acquisition possible. This model has high potential in Kyrgyzstan's ethnically mixed regions (Bishkek and the Chuy valley).

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[10] Baker, 1988, 46ff
[11] Cazabon, Nicoladis, Lambert

Evaluative studies about the participating children's attitudes towards languages and their own bilingualism have shown that "the psychological impact on the students is enormous". The most important differences in various studies have shown that the value attributed to both languages and both cultures in the *maintenance* and *two-way immersion* programs contribute to the student's self esteem and thus allow him or her to score higher in language proficiency as well as in academic subjects[12]. The relationship between language, self-esteem and academic achievement is relevant for Kyrgyzstan, since a lot of Kyrgyz-speaking students struggle in the Russian dominated higher education[13].

The different requirements (amount of minority vs. majority students) for each of the models proves that none of them provides the ultimate and perfect solution. Which bilingual education model can channel linguistic resources and create unity and equality but at the same time foster diversity in Kyrgyzstan?

These models and concepts illustrate some of the possibilities, however they will need to be adapted to the Kyrgyzstani socio-linguistic realities.

4. ORGANIZATIONAL QUESTIONS

4.1 Curriculum

Can all classes be taught in the second language?

It is recommendable that students become literate in one language first before they start writing in the second language[14]. The literacy skills from one language can then be transferred to the second. Successful bilingual programs introduce the second language in classes which are cognitively less demanding, and where writing skills are not required, e.g. sports, music. Those subjects are ideal because language does not play a central role and is contextually embedded[15], i.e. students can participate with only little knowledge of this language.

Nevertheless, the new language has to be extended to cognitively more demanding subjects. This is particularly important for the introduction of Kyrgyz into Russian schools, since otherwise Kyrgyz will not lose its stigma of the language for academically less important subjects.

An organisational question, which also needs to be considered is the coordination between pure language classes and the subjects taught in the new language. If language teachers take up the newly introduced vocabulary and sentence structures in the language classes, the child will find it less difficult to understand the taught content in the new language. Hence, teaching in the new language is

[12] ibd.
[13] Cp. Korth, 2001
[14] Baker, 1993, 201ff.
[15] Wode, 1995, 66

not to the detriment of content teaching, i.e. there is less danger that students fall behind in comparison to monolingually educated students.

4.2. Teachers:

In the ideal case, all teachers in a bilingual education program are bilingual to a certain degree, so that the students have the possibility to express themselves in their first language. This ideal might be difficult to realize in Kyrgyzstan, where many Russian teachers are not competent in Kyrgyz. Depending on the region this can be solved flexibly. However, no matter to which degree teachers are bilingual, it is very important that they speak in one language only and that they have native-like competence in the language in which they teach, so that they speak naturally and correctly.

4.3.Textbooks

A central question for the organization of bilingual pilot classes in Kyrgyzstan concerns textbooks. Is sufficient material in both languages available in the schools? Can material from Kyrgyz resp. Russian schools be applied in a bilingual program or do new textbooks for a specific bilingual purpose need to be created?

Since textbooks in both languages exist, it is a matter of reorganizing those resources for the use as basic teaching material. In certain cases it has to be determined whether texts correspond to the child's cognitive development. Books for native speakers might use complex sentences, which are too demanding for the second language learner. Hence, teachers may find it necessary to create material with adequate linguistic and visual input, which is more suitable for teaching specific content in the new language.

4.4. Composition of Classes

In order to guarantee equal education opportunities for all students, the second language should be new for a large proportion of children in one class. Otherwise, if the majority of children are competent in the newly introduced language, and only a small group of children is not, the latter experience their lack of knowledge as an indicator of inferiority, which will not only negatively influence their self-esteem, but also their academic achievement. In contrast, if only a few students are already competent in the newly introduced language, this does not present a problem and it may even be helpful to stimulate interaction in the target language.

In the ethnically mixed regions, with potential for a two-way immersion program, Russian and Kyrgyz speakers should amount to approximately equal number of students in one class. Children,

who are already bilingual can of course also be integrated and profit from bilingual education in so far that they do not need to neglect either one of their languages, with the danger of "forgetting" it.

Generally speaking, bilingual education is suitable for ALL children, since the acquisition of two or more languages happens in a natural environment.

3. RESULTS OF BILINGUAL CLASSES

Children who go through a bilingual education program naturally grow up with two languages. They might not acquire native-like competencies in the second language, but they will be more fluent in the new language, than their peers in the traditional language classes. Their bilingualism will also make it easier for them to learn other languages and to become intellectually flexible.

These children grow up with a favourable attitude towards other ethnic and linguistic groups and are more confident of their own ethno-linguistic identity. Thus bilingualism is a prerequisite for dialogue and understanding between ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan.

Although bilingual education has high potential in Kyrgyzstan and is generally considered effective, it is not a magic instrument which will make all linguistic problems disappear at once. But it is an option, that has not yet been applied in Kyrgyzstan. Since we are working with young children, this is a long term investment into the future of multiethnic Kyrgyzstan.

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